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Teacher-Librarian Collaboration: A Win-Win Situation for All

In order to have a 21st-century learning environment where students learn the skills necessary to succeed in the digital age, collaboration between librarians and classroom teachers is essential. The task is a great one and an impossible one to accomplish alone. With the librarian’s help, students, teachers, librarians themselves, and administrators benefit when collaboration occurs.

Benefits for Students

In *Empowering Learners*, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) asserts that evidence of a strong library program focuses on what the students learn instead of what the library program does (AASL 42). Collaborative planning positively impacts vocabulary and reading comprehension achievement as seen in Farmer’s study of 60 California schools (30), this growth could be attributed to the fact that when teachers and librarians collaborate, students receive more individualized attention (“Kindergarten Teacher”). Therefore, the presence of a librarian who collaborates with teachers to deliver high quality instruction is essential to the academic achievement of students.

Student achievement can also be attributed to the development of critical thinking skills. In her article, "The School Librarian as Teacher: What kind of teacher are You?” Hamilton states that as librarians lead small group activities in the library, students will learn to work in a collaborative setting and will gain a deeper understanding of the content they are researching (Hamilton 37). For instance, when librarians help classroom teachers incorporate the information literacy standards into their teaching, students learn to evaluate information they find (“Elementary Principal”). They also learn research, citation, and presentation skills (“7th-grade Language Arts Teacher”). As students delve into the research process, they are not only learning to become effective collaborators, but they are also becoming involved in learning experiences that are meaningful (“8th-grade Language Arts Teacher”) and enjoyable (“High School Student Teacher”). The enjoyment and meaning students get from the lessons on which librarians and classroom teachers collaborate and the skills they learn while engaging in those lessons helps give rise to a generation of learners who will be armed with the 21st-century skills needed to be successful in today’s digital era and to be prepared for college.

Benefits for Teachers

While students are the intended primary beneficiary of teacher-librarian collaboration, classroom teachers profit, as well. School librarians can assist teachers in planning, delivering, and assessing lessons. They have both instructional materials and curricular ideas they bring to collaborative planning sessions to offer as teacher support (Kimmel 91) to assist teachers with ideas like helping to improve projects and providing sample rubrics to plan for student assessment (“High School Student Teacher”). Librarians also provide classroom support that can be as simple as recognizing vocabulary the teacher uses and incorporating the same language into library lessons (“8th-grade Language Arts Teacher”) or as involved as coteaching a lesson or sharing the assessment responsibilities of a research project (“High School Student Teacher”). Teacher-librarian collaboration at this level helps the teacher by connecting with classroom learning and sharing the teacher’s workload. From what we have seen, working with the librarian to use the library space and resources is a common, valuable service librarians provide, but more involved collaboration like coteaching rarely happens. When it does, the school librarian ends up taking on most of the instructional responsibility and the classroom teacher’s involvement resembles crowd control more than coteaching.

When classroom teachers and school librarians are able to implement coteaching experiences, the classroom teacher benefits as much as the student. The opportunity to work side-by-side with another professional educator creates what Moreillon calls “job-embedded” professional development (7). Teachers are able to see how the librarian works in real time with the teacher’s actual students using the teacher’s taught curriculum (Moreillon and Ballard 6). When speaking of school librarians, Principal Paula Godfrey says school librarians “teach teachers to be better at their craft” through collaboration and professional development (“Principals Know”). Mary Ann Nichols, a middle school language arts teacher, reinforces this idea in her description of information about Pathfinders and other things she learned while coteaching with her school librarian (“7th-grade Language Arts Teacher”). While we have not observed true coteaching in our educational experiences, we have seen that teachers who participate in library lessons are learning from their experiences with the school librarian. Increasing the collaboration between the teacher and librarian would provide even more opportunity for professional development.

Benefits for Librarians

Collaborative partnerships benefit librarians as much as they benefit students and teachers. The librarian can assume the learner role when working with students, teachers, and other educators. For example, students may introduce the librarian to a new technology that the librarian, in turn, demonstrates to teachers for use in the classroom (AASL 20). Like teachers, librarians also have professional growth opportunities from “coteaching and co-assessment of student learning” in side-by-side collaborative projects (Moreillon 8).

Teacher-librarian collaboration also aids librarians in developing necessary leadership skills. “Empowering learning through leadership” is one of the guidelines for school library programs established by the AASL (45). Partnering with teachers establishes the librarian as an instructional leader on campus (Moreillon and Ballard 6), strengthening relationships with teachers in all content areas. By working with teachers across the curriculum, librarians develop a “global perspective of the school” (“Elementary Principal”) and can truly make a difference for all members of the school community.

Benefits for Administrators

As the leaders of a school, administrators can impact the way teacher librarians are viewed by their peers (Zmuda and Harada 27). But ultimately, many administrators feel that it is up the the teacher librarian to show how they can make a difference in students’ achievement (Church 25). When librarians are "lifelong learners," an "advocate for the program," and "a team player who volunteers to participate in the collaborative process," administrators' views of librarians are nothing but positive (Church 19). Virginia elementary school principals agreed that building the capacity of the staff in use of technology, effective Web searching, use of databases (to students, parents, and staff), intellectual property, and copyright are among the type of staff development that teacher librarians should provide (Church 13). As lifelong learners, teacher librarians are constantly learning something new, and administrators benefit from that by having them collaborate in the professional development of teachers.

Administrators like Godfrey notice the role the librarian plays in a school. She attests that "there is no one else that impacts the academic achievement of every single child in the building" (“Elementary Principal”). By involving themselves in curriculum development and assessment design, librarians gain a global perspective of what is being taught to the students and are, therefore, better equipped to offer support and resources to teachers as they collaboratively plan engaging lessons (Church 22). Kimmel also noted the fact that librarians have a broader perspective of the school because they are able to make connections across the grade levels (92). Additionally, McGregor concludes that as a leader creating a culture of collaboration, the librarian should be aware of the needs of both students and staff and be prepared to offer resources and ideas to meet those needs (204), like when the librarian and the teacher worked together to integrate writing into Art class (“High School Art Teacher”). The librarian’s schoolwide perspective combined with their commitment to teaching and learning make them a valuable asset to the campus administration.

Conclusion

The pressures of today’s educational climate--filled with high-stakes testing, 21st-century skills, and No Child Left Behind--are enough to crush the joy of teaching and learning for any educational professional, especially if such a daunting task is tackled alone. Collaboration between the school librarian and the teacher forms partnerships that benefit students, teachers, the librarian, and administrators, leading everyone to the primary goal--student achievement. Teacher-librarian collaboration is a win-win situation for all stakeholders.

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